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Property and Pentecost

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Property and Pentecost

(An Address to the Graduates of Austin Theological Seminary on May 2, 1945.)

By

M. E. MELVIN

Acts 4:32. "*Neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own.*"

Acts 2:47. "*And the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved.*"

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FOREWORD

No minister of our Church has served the Church in the field of Stewardship with more distinction or with greater success than has Dr. M. E. Melvin. The enviable position held by our Church among the Churches of North America in its giving to benevolences is largely the result of his leadership, when as Secretary of Stewardship in the early days of that office, he stirred the Church to its foundations as it saw afresh its obligations and its opportunities.

God is still using him in this field. When the address presented herewith came to our attention, we immediately felt it should be given wide circulation throughout the Church. At our request Dr. Melvin has granted us permission to publish it. It is sent out with the prayer that God may bless it as He has other writings from the same pen.

We would express to the author our grateful appreciation for this service.

J. G. Patton, Jr.
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PROPERTY AND PENTECOST

Property and Pentecost; savings and soul winning; stewardship and evangelism! Is there any essential and inherent connection between the two?

A careful study of the record of Pentecost and the natural results that followed, together with a study of the experience of the Church in periods of great revival, and likewise in periods of waning evangelistic fervor, indicate that there is a very close connection. In fact so close and intimate that we are forced to the conclusion that we may never expect a great revival of evangelism unless and until the body of believers in the Church have faced and solved the problem of a Christian's attitude to his property.

It should be made clear in the beginning that evangelism, soul winning, witnessing ever has been and ever will be the major objective of the Church. All else is incidental. Nor is money the primary need. Never! The primary need is a Church filled with people who make an honest acknowledgement that all they possess belongs to God. But the plain fact is that the Church is filled with people who dribble out "contributions," without any thought or acknowledgement of God's complete ownership of their possessions. *It is the attitude towards possessions that matters and not their intrinsic value.*

Which is Cause and Which Effect?

It is a waste of time to argue this: Did Pentecost produce the right attitude towards possessions or was it vice versa? We gain nothing in seeking to prove which comes first, hen or egg, since they are interdependent. When in the study of mineralology we find two minerals usually in the same ore-bearing formation of Mother-earth, such as lead and silver, or lead and zinc, the natural conclusion is that they are very close kin in atomic structure. The important fact is that Mother-earth used some secret to produce two diverse minerals in the same process. The Holy Spirit operates to produce fervid evangelism and honest stewardship of property side by side. And the important fact, which the Church seems slow to grasp, is that we never find the one without the other.

Likewise, it is useless to discuss the relative importance of the two. Means assume a high place of priority when ends are thwarted.

When a city's water supply is cut off because of a broken or clogged water main it does not require a meeting of the city fathers to remedy the trouble instanter. If the wrong attitude of Christian people towards property handicaps an aggressive program of evangelism why waste time on non-essentials?

Our One Question

Is the attitude of Christian people towards their possessions contributing to our slow moving program of evangelism?

The answer calls for a brand of honesty, unselfish, bold, fearless. Pentecost began a new dispensation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Instead of discarding the fundamental structure of the Old Testament teaching the Holy Spirit utilized it in forming the framework of the new order. Laws on murder, theft, adultery were neither countermanded nor amended. And neither was the Old Testament concept of possessions discarded or amended. The new converts were all Jews. Did they adopt suddenly the attitude they displayed as to their possessions? "Neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own." No, their forebears had been drilled for untold generations in the basic truth that they possessed but did not own property. For the first time in the history of the Church, since its organization under Abraham, this fundamental teaching of Scripture had a wide-open door and call to be put into practice on a large scale. It was the fruitage from the roots that ran far back in Hebrew history. It was the visible demonstration of a new life imparted by the risen Lord.

Communism is not the name for this attitude. "Communism involves community of ownership and of production by the State. In this case there was only community of distribution and consumption by the Church. The former must be enforced by law, while the latter is inspired by love. The right of private property was not abolished, and no one was required to sell the accumulations of a life time and put the proceeds into a common treasury."

This attitude towards possessions had at least three direct results: It solved an emergency problem created by stranded Jews in Jerusalem, who having become Christians, could not return home and to Judaism; it set free to bear witness every new convert; it furnished the Holy Spirit hearts and lives to work with and through.

We can grasp the significance of this Pentecost experience by asking what would have been the probable result if Peter or the other Apostles had made outspoken protest against this attitude of the new converts as to their possessions? Is it possible to assume that the Holy Spirit could have made enthusiastic witnesses out of those converts if they had held then the pagan concept of property ownership which so large a part of the Christian Church today clings to?

Certainly one permanent lesson for the Church out of Pentecost is that the financial creed of the pentecostal Christians is the financial creed for all Christians for all time. It was the Scriptural concept of possessions that made easy the passion to testify. And if we want a Church today of witnesses, eager to testify, we must first get Christian people to thinking straight and acting right on this matter of their property. The need of the Holy Spirit for unfettered lives is the same today as it was on the day of Pentecost.

God's Program Answers Our Question

We turn from Pentecost to a long range look at the program of God. It can be expressed in terms of "invasion"—an invasion, not of armed force but of witnesses for Him. The order from the risen Lord that became global was anticipated, though poorly understood, through centuries of Hebrew history. There was first the invasion of Canaan. His army of witnesses were to go in and take it, financed by the tithe, the material expression of God's ownership. They often failed and were called back by anointed prophets.

And when the returning captives under Nehemiah invaded their own lost land under a program of restoration it too was financed and made possible by a restoration first of God's sign of ownership, the tithe.

The centuries unroll, and Malachi, the prophet of the Advent appears. His message? "Return unto me, saith the Lord." And how? Quit bringing mouldy bread, sour wine, lame and sick lambs, and offer the best. "And prove me, saith the Lord."

Prove God with property! Why cannot we ever learn it? In Malachi's day God claimed priority on every vineyard and every sheep-fold. Only the forms of wealth have changed since then. The fundamental claim of God has never changed.

More centuries unfold, and the risen Lord is saying his last word. He gives an order, global in scope, unlimited in time. "Go ye, therefore and teach (witness to) all nations." And Pentecost presented the first real opportunity! Their tongues were unloosed; their lips unsealed; their lives unclogged. They had something to talk about and they told it—only after the status of their property had been determined by God's age-old claim.

Christ's Command Answers Our Question

The order of our Lord under the terms of the Great Commission calls for three steps from every follower.

First, it calls for an *enlistment.* "Follow me." To follow means only to follow. It means to obey his order. To stop with a confession of Him as Savior is like a soldier who takes the oath of allegiance, puts on the uniform—but goes A. W. O. L. at will. What had He to say about money, property, possessions? More than about any other thing! Was it an accident that He made the proper use of possessions here the test in the final judgment there? "Inasmuch as ye did it unto others, ye did it unto me . . ." And they stand on the right with his sheep. Now, in the light of his enlistment order evaluate the conduct of the great bulk of his followers today. He is in supreme command—except in the control of their property. And we want an army of personal workers in our program of evangelism!

Second, the command calls for a real *invasion.* An invasion into the hearts and lives of the enemies of God. "All the world." The slow progress of missions has ever been a problem of financial support, not of workers ready to be sent. And we are right back to the problem of who owns the possessions in the hands of Christian people? What would have been the probable result if 50 years ago ten thousands of messengers of the Cross had invaded the unhappy Japanese Empire? Or what would be the result in any local church today if every member, unfettered by his concept of property, would come to think of himself as a recruit in an invading army of Christ our Lord?

Third, the command calls for *unconditional surrender.* Nothing less will answer. Half-hearted invaders dickering with God over their property, out calling on the enemies of God to surrender! The irony of it! The pentecostal Christian, meeting a stranger on the

streets of Jerusalem, was not tongue-tied. How can Mr. and Mrs. Average Christian today urge an unbeliever to make an unconditional surrender, when the lower half of his or her life is totally exempt from the control of Christ—that half where income is earned and spent? *And the acid test of surrender?* Not pious prayers, nor church attendance, nor frequent liberal "contributions" to a church budget. But the same test that the pentecostal Christians met. He who gives the order added: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God . . ." And no modern Christian on earth can put the interests of the kingdom first who begins by denying control to his Lord over his income. If Christ is excluded in this lower level of life He will be automatically restricted in the upper levels of life.

Look in on a typical scene in a Christian home. The Sunday service is over and the Sunday dinner. The wife and mother this morning sang in her clear soprano voice, leading the choir:

"Take my life and let it be,
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my silver and my gold;
Not a mite would I withhold."

The family are reading the papers. The advertisements scream their appeal.

"Darling," she exclaims, addressing her husband. "I see here where Brown's store is offering tomorrow a $500.00 fur coat for $250.00. Do you suppose . . . ?" She slips over to his armed chair and snuggles up to him.

The poor helpless provider of mundane things knows full well that she has a perfectly good fur coat, but he grunts inaudibly, sags further down on the small of his back—and gives up.

Will any one make a personal worker out of her, or him?

What Remedy Can The Church Employ?

Is any remedy indicated? This constant dickering with God over dollars changed into a desire to win others for Him? It does not lie in the direction of talking about evangelism. It does lie in the direction of opening up channels for the full use of the Holy Spirit.

This is not speculation. Let the experience of Protestantism be-

tween 1850 and 1860 in England, Ireland, Scotland and America bear witness. The great revival of 1858 swept like a prairie fire across these countries.

Jeremiah Lamphier, a lay missionary in New York City, called a prayer meeting on September 23, 1857, in the North Dutch Church on Fulton Street. There was no preaching. Only prayer. "It was like a match to oiled tow." The movement leaped to other cities across this country. Business, professional and working men confessed their sins and turned to the Christian life. Under the flaming eloquence of Charles Finney a member of the State Supreme Court of New York came forward in surrender to Christ. This started a near stampede. "The spirit of revival grew tenser and deeper; it swelled as a pent-up tide at the flood until it burst, wave upon wave over the rejoicing land."

But, lest we forget, this revival followed the stewardship revival that began ten years before. Dr. Able Stevens had a large part in this. His clarion call went out: "The next great idea to be brought out and made prominent in the Church is the right relation of Christian men to their property." Prizes for stewardship essays were offered on both sides of the Atlantic. Thousands participated. The ministry led. Every church felt the glow of this movement. Then the evangelistic revival came. The stewardship revival "digged the trenches across the field and prepared the way of the Lord. For it is ever so that 'tithes' come before the blessing'."

Today our problem is not one of conversion but one of consecration. These complacent Christians who fill our churches are Christians. And so is the soldier in uniform, who has gone A. W. O. L. a soldier too.

One distinct difference between the new Jewish recruit at Pentecost and the recruits of today must be kept in mind. The former had no need to be "re-educated" in the scriptural concept of property ownership. While the latter, because of an inherited pagan concept of property, assumes that he owns, and not God. Our problem then simplifies and the focus sharpens. We have a job of "education" that Peter did not have at Pentecost.

It is useless to treat symptoms instead of causes. A man has a sudden collapse and the physician does not stop with ordering an ice-pack for his head. A small blood clot has formed and it must be

dissolved. Let us quit wasting time on a spiritually paralyzed church membership. A "blood clot" has formed in their bank account. Hot pads or ice packs in the shape of fervent appeals for consecration have little effect. Go after the real cause.

But some one objects, as a Texas Pastor once did to me, that if we get a man we get his money. And he quoted the example of the Berean Christians who "first gave themselves." Too naive, brother! Entirely too simple. We overlook the fact that these Bereans had practically no possessions—nothing to form "blood clots" with. On the other hand go to that half-surrendered Christian capitalist in your church, who forsooth "contributes" largely to the church budget, and ask him to head up a team of personal workers in your evangelistic campaign. And get him if you can!

How can any believer glow with evangelistic fervor who refuses to acknowledge God's claim on him? How can he possibly work out a practical partnership with God in the extension of the Kingdom when he closes his heart to every claim on income made by the Silent Partner? God is no Partner to him, but a Beggar, directed to the basement for bargains, or to the back door for unwanted scraps. A former U. S. Senator from the West, in the quiet of his library said to a prominent churchman: "I was a Christian man . . . and it is fair to say that I lived a consistent life . . . but it was not until I recognized God to be the actual owner of the property I held that I understood the thrill of fellowship with God. Since that day fellowship with God has been natural and easy."

One admission must be made here. No one can claim that all Christians who have settled the property question properly will make good personal workers in our crusade of evangelism. Simply because some will continue to be religious "cranks," incapable of influencing other people. But, on the other hand, *without fear of challenge it can be said that the world never has seen and never will see one example of an earnest personal worker who has not previously set himself right with God on this matter of property ownership.*

So, if we would see our country swept with a great evangelistic fire then let us first enlist an army of "invaders" who know what surrender is and who can get others to lay down their arms against

God. This means that stewardship must precede evangelism as a means to an end.

You young preachers, who are just going out, have a wonderful opportunity to leave your mark on this generation. The pastor who leads his church into the real practice of Christian stewardship will open wide channels for the inflow of the Holy Spirit. You will miserably fail if you try to present the tithe as a means of raising a church budget. But if you will take the exalted stand of God's ownership of all property, and preach this without fear, you will have behind you the unfailing promises of God and the past history of the Church to support you, and the crying need of the Church today to inspire you.

To illustrate the close relationship existing between a sense of God's ownership of property and a burning desire to see others saved, I bring you a story out of the experience of the late great Baptist preacher, Dr. George Truett. For years Dr. Truett annually held special services under a tent on the West-Texas plains for the cattlemen and cow-boys. At the close of the service one morning a big cattleman came forward and said: "Preacher, I want you to take a walk with me." They entered a canyon that opened onto the plain. On and on they walked in silence, Dr. Truett wondering what it was all about.

Coming to a sand bed the cattleman stopped. "This will do," he said. "I want you to get down here and pray for me. Give the Lord all my land—every acre of it. And when you get through that give Him all my cattle— every head of them. And don't let Him go until I have a word with Him."

Dr. Truett poured out his heart for this rugged man. Both were in tears. When he had finished the cattleman said in sobs: "Now Lord, you've got all my land and all my cattle, and I want you to give me my boy." Then it was for the first time that Dr. Truett knew of a wayward boy who had broken the father's heart.

They returned in silence to camp. That night when the preacher took the platform in the tent he noticed a young man seated by the father in the rear. The preacher had not used more than ten minutes

of the service when he saw a stir in the rear. Father and son were on their way to the front. The aisles filled. The area about the platform became crowded with men breaking into a confession of sin. There was no more preaching that night.

When everything is surrendered to God the windows of heaven open. As it was in Malachi's day, at Pentecost, today, and always God waits on man's surrender *at the place where surrender is hardest.*

Go out and preach this and God will honor your ministry.

THE END.

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